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**The Dual Use of an Historical Event:
'Rwanda 1994', the Justification and Critique of Liberal Interventionism**

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Abstract

This essay places the 1994 genocide in Rwanda in the context of the academic and political rise of liberal interventionism since 1990. It argues that this historical event is important for the debate about 'humanitarian interventions' in two different ways: on the one hand, as a signifier, 'Rwanda 1994' has been used (or, for that matter, misused) in order to justify an almost unlimited international agenda of liberal interventionism and social engineering; on the other, the genocide that could arguably have been prevented represents the exceptional case where military intervention can indeed be justified – but precisely because it is not in need of a specifically liberal justification. What would have made a military-based prevention of genocide justifiable in this particular case is precisely the aim to prevent something that is universally agreed to be unacceptable (genocide). The liberal twist in the justification narrative, in contrast, tends to emphasize the difference between the (liberal) 'us' and the non-liberal 'them', consequently claiming the legitimate right for the 'us' to decide about the use of force exclusively, that is, without the 'them'. The continuation of the narrative into answering the post-intervention question 'what now?' then leads consequently into the necessity of imposing one's own system of rule as a general norm without due attention for the specifics of the situation 'on the ground'. The exceptional features of 'Rwanda 1994' (the empirical event), thus, point in a critical way to all those cases where 'Rwanda 1994' (the signifier) has been used to make the case for an ever expanding agenda of liberal ('just') war.

Keywords: Democratic Peace; Liberalism; Humanitarian Intervention; Genocide; Democracy Promotion

1. Introduction

'Crimea is not Kosovo' has become the Western battle cry to distance oneself from the new Darth Vader on the European security space. Well, the West¹ attacked a sovereign state without self-defence needs or a UNSC authorization – as did Putin (only that the West created more collateral damage through regular armed forces while Putin used [start p. 281] non-declared troops). And the West cut off a slice of a sovereign state against its will (and against the letter of a UNSC resolution), as did Putin (only that Russia annexed the slice to national territory). Both parties appealed to self-determination for the majority population in the area

¹ In this article, we use 'the West' and 'Western' as a simplifying shortcut to refer to the group of states and societies that are usually identified, and usually identify themselves, as being part of 'the West' – or, formerly, 'the First World'.

concerned and claimed preventing harm to these people, the West with better evidence (a cruel anti-guerrilla war by Serbian authorities, overreacting to UCK provocations, versus some provocative moves by the Kiev parliament and the jingoism betrayed by part of the coalition of political forces that had ousted Ukraine's president Victor Yanukovich).

Thus, there are differences between 'Crimea' and 'Kosovo' but there is one basic commonality: On behalf of some overarching, altruistic goal, an external power empowered itself to intervene militarily in a sovereign state to do whatever it deemed necessary. Yet the West maintains emphatically that the autocratic 'other' did something fundamentally different. 'Rwanda' is not for them, but for the West alone. 'Saving strangers' (Wheeler 2002), the formula for the post-Rwanda self-styled Western vocation, is denied to those that are not seen as part of the community of liberal democracies.² When they utter the same justification, they lie. When Western democracies do, they speak truth. The humanitarian argument is appropriated to the Western agenda, even though the same West claims that it has become a *universal* norm. If it were universal, it belonged to everybody – as the R2P norm was adopted universally by the 2005 UNGA. Then, it could be invoked by non-democracies, too. Vice versa, if the Western appropriation were valid, and 'Rwanda' were a call to democracies only, then the norm might justify expanding the Western system in a missionary style – once 'the West' has intervened, democracy is imposed to expand the realm of peace.

What is specific about Rwanda 1994 – and sets it apart from both Kosovo 1999 and Crimea 2014, not to speak of Iraq 2003 – is that no state opposed military activities as an illegitimate interference with a sovereign state (Finnemore 2003, 79-80). Among scholars, even most intervention sceptics accept that a 'humanitarian intervention' would have been legitimate to prevent or stop the Rwandan genocide (cf. Etzioni 2007, 33-34; Pattison 2010, 2; Walzer 2004, xi). This suggests that 'Rwanda 1994' represents the exceptional case where military intervention can indeed count on universal support. Instead of requiring a specifically *liberal* justification, a military intervention in Rwanda would have aimed at preventing something that is universally agreed to be unacceptable (genocide). And it would, correspondingly, not have encountered any barrier in terms of procedural legalization (UNSC authorization): the problem was not opposition from autocracies, but general disinterest – in particular by democratic governments.

² Of course, liberal democracy can also be found outside the group of countries that are usually associated with 'the West'. Liberal thoughts and norms are not the exclusive property of 'the West' (and liberal ideology is also contested within the West). Still, the liberal agenda in international politics originates from, and is mainly driven by, Western countries.

There is still another way in which ‘Rwanda 1994’ has shaped the debate about humanitarian intervention: Largely independent from the empirical event, ‘Rwanda 1994’ has been misused as a signifier to justify an almost unlimited international agenda of liberal interventionism and social engineering. While ‘Rwanda 1994’ (the empirical event) united the world in its rejection of the genocide and its shame about the failure to prevent it, the liberal twist in the [start p. 282] justification narrative tends to emphasize the difference between the (liberal) ‘us’ and the non-liberal ‘them’, claiming the legitimate right for the ‘us’ to decide about the use of force without the ‘them’. The continuation of the narrative into answering the post-intervention question ‘what now?’ leads consequently into the necessity of imposing one’s own system of rule as a general norm without due attention for the specific situation ‘on the ground’. The exceptional features of ‘Rwanda 1994’ (the empirical event), thus, point in a critical way to all those cases where ‘Rwanda 1994’ (the signifier) has been used to make the case for an ever expanding agenda of liberal (‘just’) war.

We exemplify our argument by presenting rhetorical segments of the liberal discourse featuring ‘Rwanda’ as a relevant signifier. In doing so, we apply the critical theory of democratic peace in the version of the ‘antinomies of democratic peace’ (Müller 2004).

2. From liberal universalism to militant liberalism, from democratic peace to democratic war

Democratic peace has moved from a deductive philosophical enterprise (Immanuel Kant) through a deductive, but empirically enriched political-theory approach (Ernst-Otto Czempiel and Michael Doyle) to a positivist ‘large n’ research program with the inevitable counter-statistics, with rationalist and constructivist branches and Marxist and post-Modernist critics (cf. Hayes 2012; Müller and Wolff 2006; Ungerer 2012). And it has scored an impressive if – in terms of consequential ethics – ambiguous success: the adoption of ‘democratic peace’ in official political justifications (Ish-Shalom 2013; T. Smith 2007). Like with the sorcerer’s apprentice, the outcome was not appreciated by all democratic peace theorists after the Iraq war (Russett 2005).

Democratic peace theory, with its excursions into policy prescriptions, has neglected the dark side of the peace between democracies: democratic war – democracies attacking autocracies without a self-defence justification –, the Siamese twin of democratic peace (Geis et al. 2006, 2013). Liberal democratic thinking opens an intellectual space that can be filled peacefully or militantly by justification narratives starting from the same propositions.

For democracies, according to the democratic peace theory, attacking their own kin is normatively prohibited. Democratic values and practices erect constraints against fighting nations with democratically elected governments (Hayes 2013). Where democracy is deficient, another democracy might eliminate these constraints by re-defining the ‘other’ as non-democratic (Oren 1995). Yet there are boundaries beyond which cognition cannot be twisted, even when one side would be strong enough to escalate without risk, as in the ‘Cod War’ between Britain and Iceland.

If attacking democracies is prevented by a prohibitive liberal norm, attacking autocracies is enabled by a permissive norm. Immanuel Kant defined the *[start p. 283]* internally and externally unlawful ‘unjust enemy’ as a legitimate object of preventive democratic defence, and allowed, as the single exception of his non-intervention norm, post-war interference in the system of rule of the vanquished country with a view to help its citizens establish a less unlawful and thus less dangerous rule (Müller and Wolff 2006).

One has to move from abstract reasoning to the muddy level of practical judgment to make this guidance work. Practical judgments, however, are far removed from the solidity of logical deduction. They struggle with ‘reality’ and are subjected to the risk of error. Whether an ‘other’ is an unjust (e.g. genocidal) enemy or a ‘normal’ autocrat defending against a violent challenge is not always easy to judge; reasonable people can disagree on the character of the ‘other’ and the seriousness of the situation. Democratic governments can differ in their readiness to employ the instruments of force, ranging from ‘using force for the good’ (an US or British attitude) to ‘force does rarely (or never) good’ (a German or Austrian attitude). This theoretical consideration is easily verified empirically: democracies vary significantly in their attitudes towards and frequency of using the sword (Geis et al. 2013), and the same democracy can vary through time depending on the type of liberal ideology which informs the government (MacMillan 2004). Historical experiences, national identities, and whether the political system facilitates polarization (majority voting) or coalitions of the centre (proportional voting), geopolitical position, and even religious orientations may influence a country’s location on the continuum between militant and pacifist liberalism.

On one thing, however, all democracies agree: Once they intervene, and once the original mission to defeat an ‘unjust enemy’ is accomplished and the question ‘what now’ is posed, the answer is unequivocally ‘install democracy!’ This answer implies an exclusionary move: Those not inclined to install democracy can hardly participate in the enterprise; for the Chinese government, for instance, toppling a regime in order to prevent genocide might not be attractive if the UN machinery then works not to help the people on the ground create the

regime they want, but to follow the blueprint of Western-inspired democracy-building like in the model case of Afghanistan. ‘Decent autocracies’ (Rawls 1999), under this perspective, are not legitimate owners of the anti-genocide agenda. This is strange. Of the three most spectacular anti-genocide interventions during the Cold War, only one was undertaken by a democracy – India 1971 terminating the Pakistan’s military operation against the East Bengal people. The other two were by non-democratic regimes: Tanzania intervening in Idi Amin’s Uganda and Vietnam intervening in Pol Pot’s Kampuchea/Cambodia (cf. Chesterman 2002, chapter 2).³ In neither case was the result a ‘clean’ democracy, because this was not the interveners’ aim. Whether the people in those countries fared worse than Bosnians, Kosovars, Afghans or Iraqis who met a strong Western commitment to build democracy is for the observer to decide.

To be sure, the notion that established democracies should use military force in order to coerce other countries into becoming democracies is heavily contested also within Western democracies and among liberal scholars. The *[start p. 284]* liberal rationale that is used to justify democratic wars is, therefore, usually not explicitly democratic missionaryism (cf. Geis et al. 2013). One crucial type of justification draws on humanitarian concerns – and, in this regard, ‘Rwanda 1994’ has become an important reference. Still, as we will demonstrate below, the liberal agenda behind the humanitarian justification of war remains important: It not only informs the debate about ‘humanitarian intervention’ in a general sense; also, as soon as the need and legitimacy of intervention is established, the aim to democratize is quickly brought back in – not simply as default option, but as the logical completion of what the intervention had begun. In this sense, humanitarian intervention is a subtype of democratic war – and ‘Rwanda 1994’ (the signifier) becomes a rhetorical means to get from democratic peace to its opposite.

3. ‘Rwanda 1994’ in the (liberal) debate about humanitarian intervention

Three months after the Kosovo war had ended, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan used the Rwanda topic in a move to legitimize this illegal military intervention:

To those for whom the greatest threat to the future of international order is the use of force in the absence of a Security Council mandate, one might say: leave Kosovo aside for a moment, and think about Rwanda. Imagine for one moment that, in those dark days and hours leading up to the genocide, there had been a coalition of states ready

³ Paradoxically, because Vietnam was belonging to the Soviet ‘evil empire’, the West kept Pol Pot’s representatives for years as ‘legitimate’ representatives of the Cambodian people in the UN General Assembly, one of the unforgettable – and unforgivable – shames of Western geopolitical opportunism.

and willing to act in defence of the Tutsi population, but the council had refused or delayed giving the green light. Should such a coalition then have stood idly by while the horror unfolded? (Annan 1999)⁴

This counterfactual usage of ‘Rwanda 1994’ proved appealing to scholars no longer willing to accept the procedural limits international law imposes on the use of military force. In discussing the ethical issues at stake in the debate about humanitarian intervention, Michael Smith (1998, 77) argued that because of cases ‘like’ Rwanda, ‘it does not seem reasonable to rule out unilateral action’. Fernando Tesón (2005), who even defended the 2003 Iraq War as a legitimate humanitarian intervention, emphasized: ‘Tragedies in Rwanda and Kosovo show that sometimes governments must act without approval.’ (Tesón 2005, 18-19) And Thomas G. Weiss drew on the images evoked by the signifier ‘Rwanda’ (‘Readers need only recall images of bodies floating in rivers in Rwanda [...]’) to make his point that ‘in extreme situations where the Security Council is unable to act, political and moral imperatives may leave no choice but “to act outside the law.”’ (Weiss 2012, 40)⁵

Michael Doyle goes even one step further. For demonstrating that the responsibility to protect (R2P) constitutes significant normative progress, he claims ‘that Security Council action during the Rwandan genocide was in part stymied by claims from Rwanda and its few supporters on the Council that the crisis was a domestic issue, not one subject to legitimate international authority’ (Doyle 2011, 83). What was still an explicitly counterfactual thought experiment in Kofi Annan’s remarks finally became an explicit factual claim.⁶

[start p. 285] This usage of ‘Rwanda 1994’ can also be found in the debate that led from Annan’s lessons from Kosovo to the adoption of R2P by the UN General Assembly at the 2005 World Summit. The ICISS report on *The Responsibility to Protect* justified its recommendations by the goal ‘no more Rwandas’ (ICISS 2001, viii) – as if the report’s redefinition of the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention would truly respond to the failure to prevent the Rwandan genocide. According to Alex Bellamy (2006, 164), in the

⁴ It has to be added, however, that Annan in the same piece also posed critical questions to those ‘for whom the Kosovo action heralded a new era when states and groups of states can take military action outside the established mechanisms of enforcing international law’: ‘Is there not a danger of such interventions undermining the imperfect, yet resilient, security system created after the second world war, and of setting dangerous precedents for future interventions without a clear criterion to decide who might invoke these precedents and in what circumstances?’ (Annan 1999)

⁵ The Rwandan genocide is generally regarded a case where a limited military intervention could have saved thousands of lives, if not entirely prevented the genocide (cf. Barnett 2002, 1; Chesterman 2002, 224; M. Smith 1998, 77). Even Kuperman, who criticizes the view of Rwanda as an easy case for intervention, still does not deny that a timely reaction could have saved a significant number of people (Kuperman 2000).

⁶ A further example of a misplaced use of ‘Rwanda 1994’ is the argument that those advocating a League of Democracies would ‘have a point’ when they refer to the UN’s failure ‘to stop genocide in Rwanda and Srebrenica’ (Schlesinger 2009, 15) – as if it were not democratic states like the US that were key players in that history of failure.

debate preceding the 2005 World Summit, ‘the United States and the U.K. continued to argue that the need to prevent “future Rwandas” meant that unauthorized intervention could not be expressly ruled out’.

The claim that ‘Rwanda 1994’ represents a case in which outdated international law prevented a humanitarian intervention sits uneasily with the scholarly record. According to Martha Finnemore (2003, 79), ‘no significant constituency was claiming that intervention in Rwanda for humanitarian purposes would have been illegitimate or an illegal breach of sovereignty’: ‘States understood very well that legally and ethically this case required intervention, and because they did not want to intervene for other reasons, they had to work hard to suppress information and avoid the word “genocide” in order to sidestep their obligations.’ (Finnemore 2003, 79-80) J.L. Holzgrefe (2003, 42) demonstrates that UNSC resolutions on Rwanda left no doubt that – long before R2P – the Security Council regarded the ‘acts of genocide’ *in* Rwanda as permitting intervention. Simon Chesterman (2002, 231) has rejected the implicit assumption ‘in many of the arguments for a right of humanitarian intervention [...] that the present normative order is preventing interventions that should take place’: ‘This is simply not true. Interventions do not take place because states do not want them to take place. Fear of international condemnation did not prevent any state intervening in Rwanda: televised images of a downed US Ranger being dragged through the streets of Somalia did.’ (Chesterman 2002, 231)⁷

Yet, one can acknowledge that in Rwanda ‘potential interveners fail[ed] to act for self-interested reasons’ (Pattison 2010, 61), and still criticize the need for UNSC approval of military interventions: ‘Insisting on Security Council authorization’, Pattison (2010, 61-62) argues with reference to Rwanda, ‘may make it easier for states to hide behind the lack of authority for their refusal to fulfill their responsibility to act in such cases. Thus, the worry that illegal humanitarian intervention will lead to abusive non-humanitarian intervention is largely misplaced.’ (Pattison 2010, 62) Robert Keohane put forward the same kind of argument, again flavoured with a reference to Rwanda: ‘Sins of omission, exemplified by the absence of intervention to stop the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, are more serious threats than sins of commission. Strong, sustained action is needed to help troubled societies and rebuild failed states.’ (Keohane 2003a, 10)

⁷ Accordingly, Alex Bellamy (2005, 34) has argued that ‘It is highly unlikely that the Security Council would have objected had others used force to halt the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Throughout the Security Council’s deliberations about Rwanda, no state publicly argued that either the ban on force (Article 2(4)) or the nonintervention rule (Article 2(7)) ought to prohibit armed action to halt the bloodshed.’ See also the accounts by Barnett (2002), Mayall (2003, 135-137), Wheeler (2002, 208-241) and Wood et al. (2008, 280-285).

In this quote, Keohane takes a further rhetorical step towards justifying ‘forceful liberalism’ (Keohane 2003a, 10): As if it were self-explanatory, the specific and narrow aim ‘to stop the genocide in Rwanda in 1994’ turns into the vague and infinite goal ‘to help troubled societies and rebuild failed states’. [*start p. 286*] Here it is: the comprehensive agenda of liberal interventionism-cum-social engineering. Putting ‘Rwanda 1994’ in this perspective leads even Michael Walzer, who elsewhere wrote sceptically about the external promotion of democracy (cf. Poppe and Wolff 2013, 386-392), to embrace a far-reaching agenda of external intervention: While he continues to reject military interventions for regime change, Walzer now argues that ‘once states have intervened for some other legitimate purpose, to defeat the Nazis, or (hypothetically, since we did not do it) to stop a massacre in Rwanda, they can continue to use it; they may even be obligated to continue to use it, for political reconstruction’ (Walzer 2008, 351). The reason for such an external obligation is limited to the prevention ‘of new massacres’ (Merkel 2008, 498), but the implications are broader: Because of ‘the empirical findings of the democratic peace literature’, Wolfgang Merkel (2008, 502-503) has argued, ‘forced regime change to rule of law and democracy’ is ‘not only permissible, but also [...] necessary after humanitarian interventions’ (see also Keohane 2003b).

Walzer (2008, 351) qualifies the call for coercive democratization by adding that ‘we need to be realistic about what kinds of politics are possible after an extended period of ethnic cleansing and murder’ and warns that an occupying army ‘is not itself, and should not try to be, an agent of political transformation’. Still, how external interveners should actively promote ‘political reconstruction’ without engaging in political transformation is difficult to imagine. Consequently, Walzer has embraced the goal of both regime change and long-term military occupation, including ‘nationbuilding as a necessary part of postwar politics’ (Walzer 2004, xiii): An intervention in Rwanda, as it ‘should have been’, would ‘certainly have aimed at replacing the Hutu Power regime’ (Walzer 2004, 19). And following regime change, Rwanda is considered ‘a candidate for trusteeship’ (Walzer 2004, 76).

Merkel’s reference to democratic peace represents the metamorphosis of this academic paradigm into public convention and political conviction (Ish-Shalom 2013). No democratic peace scholar claims that the existence of democracy is a necessary condition for preventing ‘mass murder and brutal violations of human rights’ (Merkel 2008, 500). But the conviction that democracy is beneficial for peace (and human rights) is enough to justify a continuing presence of ‘intervening forces’ in Afghanistan or Iraq until consolidated liberal democracies have been established (cf. Merkel 2008, 487, 491-494). Even if Merkel does not mention

Rwanda, this case is once again interesting – not only because of Walzer’s plea for ‘trusteeship’. If anything, the Rwandan genocide shows ‘how catastrophically wrong political openings can go in ethnically riven societies’ (Carothers 1997, 98; cf. Snyder 2000, 296-306). After the genocide and the toppling of the regime, the establishment of a relative successful ‘authoritarian developmental state’ (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014, 2) falsifies the proposition that coercive democratization *post bellum* is a necessary means to prevent a relapse to genocide or civil war (see also Gourevitch 2009). [*start p. 287*]

4. Conclusion

In the debate about humanitarian intervention, the reference to Rwanda is used to justify a comprehensive agenda of liberal interventionism that includes the illegal use of military force and the responsibility (‘to rebuild’) supposedly triggered by such military interventions. Very clearly, the misplaced signifier ‘Rwanda 1994’ is chosen not because it fits the substance matter at hand, but because it scores high on the ‘scale of evil’ (M. Smith 1998, 78). It is, of course, an important question how ‘future Rwandas’ might be avoided (Bellamy 2006) – but this is not what the discussed references to Rwanda are about. They are about using ‘Rwanda’ with a view to empowering military intervention in different contexts and with different purposes.

Interventions are ambivalent, as is the entire business of promoting democracy and human rights from the outside. It would probably be unfair to dismiss the humanitarian justifications as merely cynical. But it is unreal to overlook strategic and economic considerations which are always part of foreign-policy decisions (cf. Wolff et al. 2014). Interest-based motivations, of course, taint the lofty humanitarian goals pronounced by pundits, but they are never absent when democracies go to war. Under this perspective, ‘Rwanda’ takes on a suspicious meaning: it might be a tool to silence justified criticism and eliminate doubts on the wisdom of a proposed intervention by ascribing to opponents a willingness to condone large-scale homicide.

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